

DTS Technology Brief

A Practical Technology Application Overview

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When writing for the Web,
you're not only affecting
the content,
you're affecting the core
user experience
because users
look at the text
and the headlines first.
Although it's important
to be grammatically correct,
it's also important
to present the content
in a manner
that draws in readers.

—Jakob Nielsen

The more succinct
the content,
the easier it is to scan.



WRITING FOR THE WEB

Reading from a computer screen is about 25% slower than from paper. Among those that deal with Web design and presentation, it is common knowledge that Web users have a short attention span. They don't generally read word for word, but scan. Users pick out key words, sentences, and paragraphs of interest. It's also known that Web users don't like to scroll, especially horizontally; but even scrolling vertically through a long column of solid text sets readers to clicking on to other sites.

Beyond reading habits, Web users are unpredictable. There's no way to tell where they're coming from on the Internet, how they got to your site, nor where they'll go after they visit your page. Because of this, your visitors won't take time for obvious marketing hype. And when they see pages with lots of fluff in place of facts, spelling and grammar errors, or just plain sloppy writing, they instantly discount the site's credibility. What is respected is a clear voice, consistent perspective, and a friendly personality, with maybe just a dash of humor and attitude.

With all of this in mind, we're going to explore some ways to grab a user and turn him or her into a reader of our pages.

STYLE

A well-conceived, well-written, and well-edited document is simply easier to read and more informative, whether printed or displayed on a computer monitor. Well prepared text moves the reader along smoothly, without confusion, and with a clear path to understanding. There are several factors that contribute to a successful written presentation.

Focus

Remember why you're writing, focus on your message, and be:

- Accurate
- Consistent
- Credible
- Current

The subject of your site dictates the style, but use the inverted pyramid principle practiced by journalists: present the most important and critical material up front. Begin each page of your site with a conclusion, and each section on the page with a topic sentence.

The guiding principle should be that the reader can click off to another page at any point and leave with the most important information.

Be Concise

Get the message across as quickly as possible. Write short, honest, tight paragraphs containing only one idea with no more than 50% of the text necessary to cover the same topic in print. Use lists and tables when you can. However, it is okay to use some redundancy when writing for the Web.

Tips

- Avoid using “click here” for links. Link the part of the sentence that describes the content of the linked information. Rewrite if necessary.
- Use contractions where appropriate.
- As a general rule, the names of companies and organizations should be a link, at least the first time they are mentioned.
- Avoid busy backgrounds on pages to make text easier to read.
- Use exclamation marks sparingly.
- Commas, question marks, and periods should generally be within a closing quote, while a colon and semicolon should be on the outside.

Be Clear

Users are goal oriented. Write simply, get to the point, then end it. Avoid marketing fluff. Use facts, with links to supporting data and complex details. Be factual without overselling the topic. Just set out the information plainly and clearly.

- Be enthusiastic, but not pushy.
- Avoid beginning paragraphs with a question.
- Humor should be used with great caution.
- Stay clear of puns and metaphors.
- Avoid technical terminology unless it is necessary; then provide a definition.
- Many readers will not understand insider jargon and acronyms.
- Get rid of all fancy words.

Writing effectively is not about showing off your vocabulary. It’s about communicating.

Be Engaging

Be direct, and be positive. An author’s task is to write in the language and style of the intended user. Think like your reader, but be yourself. Write conversationally and use action verbs in the present or present perfect tense, with the active voice.

Formatting

Don’t force users into reading long blocks of text. Write short, one topic, paragraphs with titles and subtitles where necessary, and create white space where appropriate to reduce eye fatigue.

- The topic, its main idea, and its conclusion should be easy to spot. Supporting and secondary information should then follow, if necessary.
- Summarize the main points in the first paragraph.
- Guide the reader by highlighting the main points, using bold and italic type for emphasis. Just don’t overdo it.
- Unlike printed text, one sentence paragraphs are acceptable.
- Slip in bulleted lists and tables when you can.

Some text doesn’t lend itself to a clipped, chunked, style. Don’t compromise the content to fit the genre. And don’t break your narrative into small segments if you expect that most users will want to print the information.

Hypertext Links

Use links to data and supporting materials to back up your facts. Make text short without sacrificing depth of content by splitting the information into multiple pages connected by hypertext links. Each page should focus on a specific topic. But link wisely; readers should not have to follow links to gain an understanding of the information.

Bulleted Lists and Tables

Use bulleted lists and tables where possible, and occasionally an appropriate chart or graphic image, to gain white space and breakup a solid block of text.

Use common sense
and
be consistent
throughout the page
and the site.

Use the same grammar
and punctuation rules
as in regular writing.

If the words are dull,
nobody will read them,
and nobody
will come back.
If the words are wrong,
people will be misled,
disappointed,
and
infuriated.
—Mark Bernstein

Titles and Subtitles

Format text with two or three levels of titles and subtitles. Think of them as headlines. Make sure each title is meaningful and descriptive, rather than something cute. A title or subtitle should tell the reader what the page or section covers.

- Use action verbs to help catch the reader's attention.
- Skip leading articles.
- Make sure the first word is important and full of information.
- Don't make all page titles begin with the same word.

Be cautious of fragmentation, though. Don't over-subdivide your information.

Blurbs

Use single sentence blurbs in a table of contents on the home page of a site or at the top of a page, or associated with titles and subtitles, to neatly and quickly summarize content and to describe what benefit or reward the user can expect. Be sure to use an appropriate tone or voice for the intended audience, and don't use puns, teasers, or cute and clever phrasing.

PAGE LENGTH

The primary measure of page length should be content. Create logical divisions and subdivisions based on the structure of your information. Don't arbitrarily divide your information to conform to some alleged measure of acceptable page length. As a general rule of thumb:

- Titles and Subtitles: 8 words or less
- Sentences: 15-20 words
- Paragraphs: 40-70 words
- Documents (pages): 500 words or less

For longer documents and pages with a large number of subtitles, provide a simple table of contents near the top.

EDITING AND REVISION

Once the content is written, run it through a spelling and a grammar checker. But don't assume these applications catch and correct all errors. The text also needs to be read, revised, edited, boiled down, paraphrased, and trimmed to remove any paragraphs, sentences, and words that don't directly help get your point across. Just don't edit the text so tightly that it becomes choppy and abrupt.

CONCLUSION

In general, the same principles that apply to printed text apply to Web text. But any good writer always considers his or her audience and adjusts the style to assure successful communication. In the end, that's what good writing is all about.

The following page presents some basic rules for grammar and syntax, as well as a list of valuable online references.

Capitalize

- FTP
- GIF
- GUI
- HTML
- JPEG
- LAN
- URL
- WAN

Tip

Don't use "in order to."
Just use "to."

Suggested Usage

- bookmark
- download
- drop down
- end user
- in box
- online
- mouse click
- printout
- pull down
- site map
- upload

GRAMMAR AND SYNTAX

Grammar and punctuation are important to professional writing, whether printed or electronic. Firm rules apply to all writing, no matter how it is presented, no matter the audience. But there are gray areas open to interpretation. The key is to make an educated decision, then be consistent. What follows are suggested best practices.

- **A vs. An with Acronyms**—Use a or an based on the acronym's pronunciation. A WYSIWIG application and an ASCII file.
- **Bold and Italics**—Use **bold** text sparingly. Bold words scattered inside the text can be confusing. Use *italics* for emphasis and to help your reader hear the emphasis you intend, making your text sound more conversational.
- **Capitalizing Titles and Subtitles**—The rule of thumb is that when a word is greater than three letters, and it is not a preposition or a conjunction, then capitalize it. Always capitalize the first and last word in the title, regardless of the part of speech.
- **Ellipsis**—Use an ellipsis (...) with a space before and after. Some applications automatically change the proper ellipsis (. . .) into the compressed version. This is acceptable for Web use.
- **E-mail**—The "e" represents the word "electronic," so e-mail is two words. Keeping the hyphen prevents mispronunciation. Capitalize when beginning a sentence.
- **Em Dash vs. Hyphens**—Use a single em dash (—) with no space between the surrounding words, instead of one or two hyphens (--). All modern word processors can produce a proper dash. Use an en dash (–) in number sequences (like phone numbers) instead of a single hyphen (-).
- **Internet, Net, Web, and Web Site**—Internet, Net, and Web should be preceded by "the" and capitalized if referring to the Internet. Web site is two words. However, use lower case and combine for webmaster, webcam, and webzine.
- **Plural Numbers and Acronyms**—The apostrophe is not necessary with plural numbers and acronyms unless the word is possessive (70s, 90s, URLs, etc.)
- **Underline**—Don't underline text unless it really is a hyperlink.
- **World Wide Web**—Capitalize the leading letter of each word. When using the acronym, use all caps (WWW) in text and lower case (www) in a URL.

REFERENCES AND SOURCES

- **Writing on the Internet**
(www.webreference.com/internet/writing/)
- **Writing Well for the Web**
(www.webreference.com/content/writing/)
- **Web Grammar**
(www.webreference.com/new/webgrammar.html)
- **Web Teaching: Writing for the Web**
(www.dartmouth.edu/~webteach/articles/text.html)
- **Writing for the Web**
(www.efuse.com/Design/web-writing-basics.html)
- **Writing for the Web**
(www.webdesignfromscratch.com/writing_for-the_web.cfm)
- **Writing for the Web and Creating Effective Online Content**
(www.webword.com/interviews/gahran.html)
- **Writing for the Internet**
(www.internetbasedmoms.com/writing-internet/internet-writing-rules.html)